Kingship and state

The Buganda dynasty

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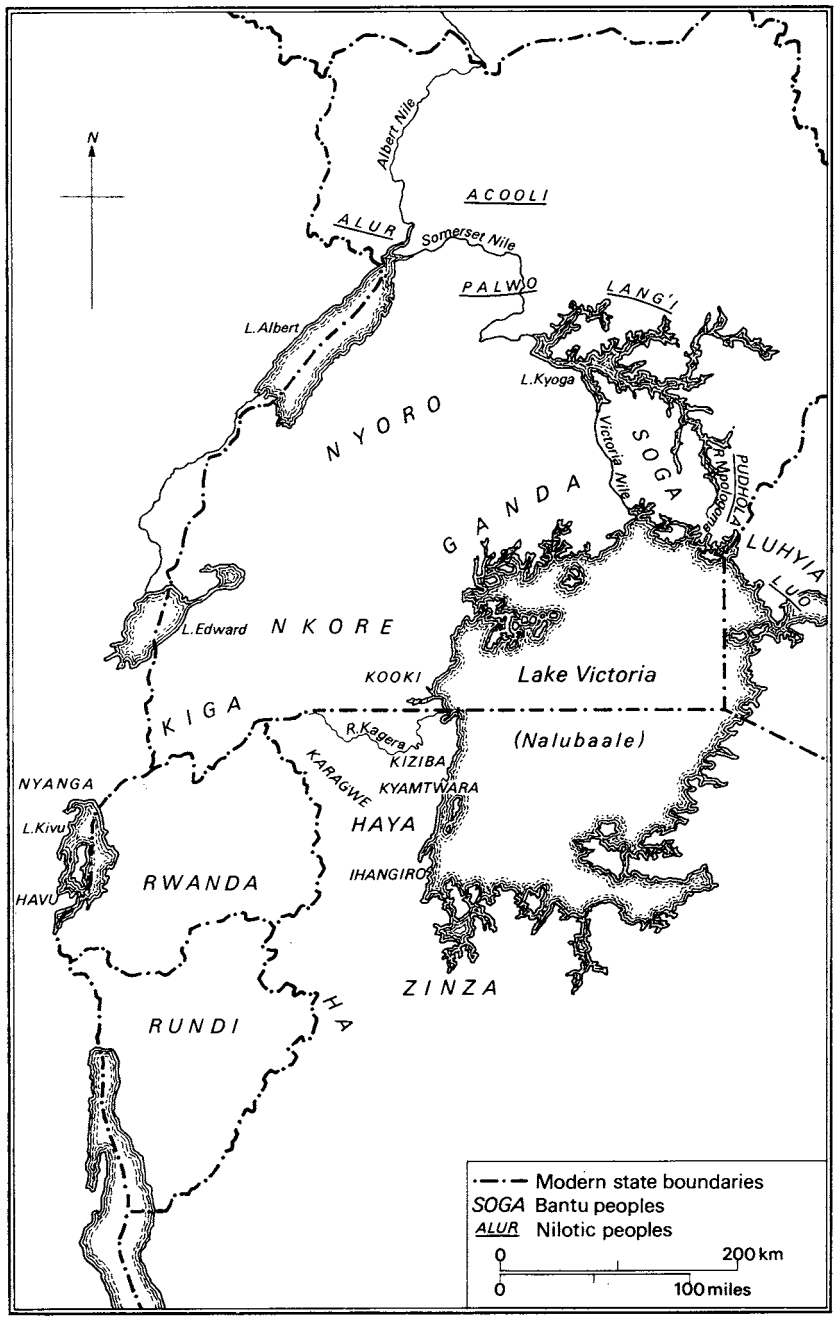
1 Preamble

This book is about the stories of the past which have been recorded in the kingdom of Buganda, the original nucleus of what has become the Uganda Republic. Especially it is concerned with stories of old kings, or characters who were reputed to be such; for Buganda was an intensely monarchical society and the past that interested it was mainly the dynastic past, or one that had been given a dynastic form. These stories have intrigued me, on and off, for four decades; and though they have been analysed from various points of view by a number of scholars,[1] I believe there is still much more to be said about them.

Buganda was important to me, for it was the first African country that I got to know. It provided me with two of the best years of my life, and I have fond memories of the beauty of the land and the kindness of the people. But there are also less personal reasons for deeming its history worthy of detailed study. When it first came to the notice of literate observers, in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, it had all the appurtenances, except writing, of a state: courts, councils, armies, taxes, a complex hierarchy of ministers, provincial governors and local chiefs. That could be said of a number of other African polities, and even in East Africa, where units were generally small and loosely organised, Buganda was not the largest or most complex; that position certainly belonged to the extraordinary kingdom of Rwanda. It is, however, acknowledged to have been quite exceptionally centralised and autocratic, conforming more closely than almost any other system to the post-Renaissance European model of a state: an organisation possessing a monopoly of legitimate force within a clearly defined territory. As such it demands and has in fair measure received the attention of both political theorists and historians.

Buganda was also at one period important to Britain, and to some extent to the West as a whole, being a key pawn in the 'scramble' for control of eastern Africa. It owed this prominence partly to its geographical position at the headwaters of the Nile but also to its adaptability, its openness to new ideas and ways of doing things. These qualities were the more remarkable in that it belonged to one of the most secluded regions of Africa, last to



Map 1 The Lakeland (derived from Benjamin C. Ray, *Myth, Ritual and Kingship in Buganda*)

experience the influence of distant cultures and economies. As late as 1840 it was wholly unknown to and unknowing of the world beyond central equatorial Africa. Within the next decade Muslim merchants from the east coast appeared for the first time at the Ganda court, in search of ivory and, to a lesser extent, slaves, and in 1862 two British army officers, John Speke and James Grant, who had been given leave for African exploration, followed in their tracks.[2]

This reconnaissance had no immediate British sequel, but Muslim influence, cultural as well as commercial, grew apace. The reigning king, or *kabaka*, Muteesa I, himself learnt to write in the Arabic script and, though he avoided the decisive step of circumcision, he adopted many Muslim practices, such as the observance of Ramadan, and broke with many of the customs of his ancestors. So when Henry Morton Stanley, brilliant journalist and intrepid traveller, came to Buganda in 1875 on the first stage of his historic journey across Africa, the court was prepared for further innovation.[3] Stanley persuaded the king to invite Christian missionaries, and in 1877 a group selected by the Anglican Church Missionary Society reached Buganda, followed two years later by French Roman Catholic evangelists.[4] Though Muteesa certainly enjoyed theological discussions, that was not really why he welcomed these strangely gifted foreigners. First and foremost, he saw them as a counterpoise to the Egyptian power that had begun to threaten his independence; agents, themselves mostly Europeans, of the ambitious Khedive Ismail had already been active in the rival kingdom of Bunyoro to the north-west, and a Belgian officer, Linant de Bellefonds, was actually visiting Muteesa when Stanley arrived. Visitors who, like Stanley, Speke and Grant, came from the east coast, where power actually rested with the harmless Arab sultan of Zanzibar, seemed to be as innocuous as their technology was valuable.[5] Muteesa, of course, could not realise that the Egyptian 'empire' on the Nile was little more than a front for the advance of European power into Africa, and it was after his death in 1884 that the real menace became apparent.

Meanwhile the great revolt of the Mahdi in the Sudan in 1883 had cut all connections between Egypt and equatorial Africa, and the threat from the north had been removed. By then, however, the European powers were on the brink of the decision to take over direct control of Africa, no longer relying on local instruments such as Egypt or Zanzibar. In 1885–6 Britain and Germany divided the east coast between them and began to plan the penetration of the interior, Germany at first much more energetically than Britain. Thus the Christian presence in Buganda began to look like a Trojan horse. Under the new king, Mwanga, the position of the missionaries became very precarious, and that of their converts even more so. By this time the latter were a quite numerous body, and indeed it is perhaps the

chief mark of Buganda's singularity that here and here only in East Africa Christianity, as well as Islam, made significant headway before the colonial conquest. The gains were made mainly among the younger generation of the ruling elite, most of all among the praetorian companies which had recently been equipped with imported firearms. The danger to the political establishment was manifest, and in 1886 some forty Christian 'readers' were rounded up and executed by burning.[6] A larger number of Muslim Ganda had suffered the same fate under Muteesa, when he found it politic to turn against Islam;[7] and there was a kind of precedent in the practice of *kiwendo*, the random slaughter carried out from time to time to ensure the health of king and kingdom. All the same it is remarkable that within a decade of the first preaching of the gospel so many youths should have been ready to die for the faith – for they had been given the chance to retract and reports say that they went singing to their death. The Catholics among them are now saints of the Church.

The 'readers' were not exterminated, however, and two years later the tensions within the kingdom erupted in a four-way armed conflict between Muslims, Catholic and Protestant Christians and the traditionalist or 'pagan' party. Into this turmoil, in the last days of 1890, came Captain Frederick Lugard, 'an officer of Her Majesty Queen Victoria' but employed at the time by the Imperial British East Africa Company, the instrument of those officials, businessmen, churchmen and military men who sought to push the British state into the heart of Africa. Buganda had just been assigned to the British 'sphere' as part of a general settlement of matters at issue between Britain and Germany, and the Company was eager to begin the exploitation of the ivory-rich and fertile Lake region in the far interior. Lugard's small force decided the internal conflict in favour of the Christians and, within the Christian party, in favour of the Protestant, or 'English', faction. Lugard then pushed through a remarkably successful scheme of power-sharing, which survived in essentials throughout the colonial era; the offices of state were divided nearly but not quite equally between Protestants and Catholics, with a small consolation prize for the Muslims. The Company was broken financially by the cost of Lugard's operations, and in 1894 a reluctant imperial government felt bound to take direct charge of the country, which was then known by the Swahili form of its name, Uganda.

The 'Uganda Protectorate' was at first supposed to be coterminous with the kingdom, but within months British-led mercenaries combined with the Christian Ganda army in an invasion of Bunyoro, half of whose territory was then transferred to Buganda. In the course of the next two decades British rule was extended over the miscellany of peoples who make up modern 'Uganda', and the authorities reverted to the proper vernacular

name of 'Buganda' for the kingdom, which became one of the four provinces of the Protectorate.

The events of 1888–92 had left King Mwanga a virtual prisoner of the British and the collaborating Christian chiefs, and a last desperate effort to regain his independence in 1897 led to his defeat and eventual deportation. The kingship was, however, preserved in the person of his infant son, Daudi (David) Cwa. Soon afterwards the Sudanese mercenary troops, the main instruments of British power, broke into mutiny, and again the 'loyal' Ganda fought with great gallantry in support of their British patrons and protectors. The survivors were doubly rewarded. Individually the Christian leaders were confirmed as a privileged elite within the Ganda kingdom; and the kingdom itself not only survived as an entity under British colonial rule but enjoyed a privileged autonomy. Like other African peoples the Ganda lost their independence, but they extracted the maximum advantage from the new dispensation, in the form of security, territorial expansion, new knowledge and material progress. Above all their rights were enshrined in a formal agreement signed in 1900 by the Christian Regents and Sir Harry Johnston, a Special Commissioner of Her Majesty. They were thus able to believe that they had not submitted to superior power but had freely accepted British tutelage.[8]

In course of time the special status of Buganda within the colonial regime was gradually eroded, and foreign interest in its history and institutions declined. But as the time came for African dependencies to be converted into states there was a revival of interest, academic and practical, in those pre-colonial societies that had already proved themselves able to tackle the tasks of government. Buganda in particular was hailed as a shining example of a 'modernising despotism',[9] a term of unalloyed approval in the political science of the 1950s. Later, however, the theory to which that term belonged came to be seen in a sinister light, as the ideological cover for the American strategy of planting military and other repressive regimes around the Third World. Buganda thus lost its liberal admirers, and by 1985 it was being presented as a case-study in tyranny.[10] The change of term is very revealing: 'despots' may have their uses but no-one looks tolerantly on 'tyrants'.

Early visitors from Europe had admired the discipline and decorum of Ganda society and the lively intelligence of its elite, but they were also shocked by its cruel and arbitary punishments and the casual ruthlessness of its apparently absolute ruler; and this ambivalence has persisted in more recent commentaries. In my own early writings about the country[11] admiration was evident; and in retrospect I find it strange that a peace-loving democrat should have responded even half-favourably to the aggressive despotism that nineteenth-century Buganda unquestionably

was. I can only plead that I was reflecting the prejudices of the late 1950s and early 1960s. That was the time when new African nation-states were being launched to the hopeful applause of most spectators, so that almost anything could be forgiven to people who had proved the ability of Africans to build and operate recognisable states.

In the 1960s, however, luck and skill deserted the Ganda. They failed either to establish the kingdom as a separate state, as most of them would have preferred, or to integrate properly with the Uganda Republic created by the departing British; and their failure plunged the whole country into the abyss. In 1966 Milton Obote, a politician belonging to the north of Uganda, broke the kingdom by force and in the following year he formally abolished it as a political entity. But to achieve these ends he had to use the Uganda army, which in 1971 decided to dispense with him as well.[12] The horrors that followed are too painful to dwell on and too well known to need retelling. But there is one misconception that needs to be contradicted. Many people assume a continuity between the brutalities of ancient Buganda and the terrible events that took place in Uganda between 1971 and 1985. That is too simple, and more than a little unfair, since the Ganda were overwhelmingly victims of the atrocities, not perpetrators. Idi Amin and Milton Obote, whose second period of power from 1980 to 1985 was probably even bloodier than Amin's, came from traditional societies of a quite different kind; and in any case their tyrannies were a product of post-colonial stresses rather than a harking back to pre-colonial patterns of behaviour.

Conversely, though, I ought never to have let my pleasant experience of late colonial Buganda colour my assessment of the very different society that existed there in the nineteenth century. There was a time when it was perhaps necessary for foreign commentators to ignore or explain away the various ferocities of Africa, past and present, but that time is long past. In the century of Auschwitz, Dresden and Hiroshima no Westerner can possibly write from a position of moral superiority, but that is no reason for concealing the fact that nineteenth-century Buganda was a place of great cruelty and that the power of the kings rested on systematic violence, both internal and external. That, however, is not all that can be said about it. European reporters were fascinated as well as appalled, recognising also heroism, questing intelligence and a courtesy that was more than superficial. The state was in its own way an intricate work of art; and whatever value judgement may be passed on it, anyone who is interested in political evolution must dearly want to understand how it came to be.

The question is, however, whether understanding is possible. Until Speke and Grant sat down to compose their journals, no words had ever been

written in Buganda, and twenty years earlier no literate person even knew that the place existed. Contemporary and near-contemporary documents, the normal raw material of the historian, are thus absolutely lacking for pre-nineteenth-century Buganda. Nor has much been learnt from material remains. One of the minor tragedies of Uganda's recent past is that, just at the time when funds for African archaeology were being greatly increased, the country became unworkable in. Investigations were resumed in 1985, but there has not yet been any systematic research in the core areas of the kingdom, and the fragments of ancient pottery that have come to light are without date or context. Work done on the periphery and in neighbouring countries, both before and after the disasters, provides a bare framework of knowledge about technical and economic change during the last two millennia; but in spite of the growing resources of archaeological science and the growing subtlety of its interpretations, its historical insights are at best limited and ambiguous. So for any real light on the origin and development of the Buganda kingdom we have to rely mainly on its elaborate corpus of orally transmitted traditions. In fact the book is at least as much about tradition as it is about Buganda. Like the foremost scholar of Africa's past, Jan Vansina, I hope to show 'how intricate, how rich, how revealing these messages from our forebears really are'.[13]

Two questions have to be confronted at once. First, is my material actually oral tradition? I must not delay what some will consider a damning admission: I have not myself collected traditions 'in the field' from living Ganda. I did long ago talk to many people in rural Buganda, but not about ancient history, in which my interest had not then developed. So I have to persuade myself that I was born too late to hear really authentic stories about the pre-colonial past, and that I can make a contribution by critically examining the stories arduously recorded by others when the old culture was still in more or less full vigour, before there had been two generations of colonial rule and of Western influences both obvious and subtle. Armchair study is perhaps more justifiable in Buganda than in most places. Vansina's most important precept for students of tradition, that they should collect as many different versions as possible, would be difficult to apply to this highly centralised society, which naturally had a centralised tradition. For most Ganda, in fact, 'tradition' has long meant the contents of a book published in 1901 as *Bakabaka b'e Buganda* (The Kings of Buganda) and republished as *Basekabaka b'e Buganda* (The Former Kings of Buganda) in 1912, 1927 and 1949. Its author was Apolo Kagwa (in modern spelling Kaggwa) who, besides being a prolific writer, was the dominant personality in early colonial Buganda, holding the office of 'prime minister' from 1889 to 1926. The present study is in the main an extended commentary on this work. There is an English translation with notes by M. S. M. Kiwanuka,[14] and

unless there is special reason to use the Ganda text references will be to that edition, which appeared in 1971.

By the 1950s there were copies of Kaggwa's book in most villages, and it would have been hard for an outsider to go behind it or beyond it. After him, it is true, a number of other Ganda writers made significant contributions. In the 1950s a retired schoolteacher with antiquarian interests, Michael Nsimbi, compiled studies of place-names and personal names which are a mine of historical detail and often help to make Kaggwa's spare narrative more intelligible.[15] Earlier the Catholic journal *Munno* had given space to wide-ranging historical discussions, with valuable commentaries by Tobi Kizito and J. T. K. Gomotoka,[16] who both belonged to distant branches of the royal house. The history written by James Miti is very important for the study of late nineteenth-century events;[17] but these are not my present concern, and none of these writers questions the basic frame of Kaggwa's story of the kingdom. He himself, moreover, was clearly presenting what was already an authorised version, for the names of the kings and some of the most interesting stories had appeared in several publications a generation earlier (see below, pp. 29–30). The material I am trying to exploit, therefore, was once oral tradition, but it has been crystallised in print for over ninety years.

The second question is whether or to what extent this tradition is history. But before we can begin to answer it certain distinctions have to be made, and first of all the crucial but not always recognised distinction between oral tradition and oral history. Those who use the latter term properly are referring to the information provided by old people about the days of their youth. The search for such information has become a flourishing branch of academic history; and indeed, few historians, when studying that part of the past which is in living memory, would fail to make use of as many memories as they practicably can. But that is not 'tradition', which deals with times beyond the memory of any living person. There is, however, an intermediate category, which might be called either first-stage tradition or secondary reminiscence. It consists of the reported experiences of those who were old when today's elderly informants were young. For example, in 1975 my father told me (not for the first time) that his grandmother had told him how, when she was a little girl, a man came to their house in Lancashire and called up the stairs: 'They've ta'en Boney.' The generations in this case were unusually long (that being the point of the anecdote), and the period of 160 years from 1815 to 1975 must be close to the maximum limit of historical reminiscence, which cannot go beyond the late childhood of the oldest grandparent of the oldest living informant. For people do not usually have any motive to retain or repeat the personal memories of those they never knew. (I do repeat my father's testimony, but that is because I

have a special interest in the past and because I know from other sources who Boney was and why his taking mattered.) So there is a fair measure of agreement that at about a century and a half before the time of first written record historical reminiscence ceases and 'tradition' takes over. Thus the classical historian Moses Finley pointed out some time ago that the Greeks of the time of Herodotus, the so-called father of history, around 450 BC, had no means of knowing what had really happened in their country before the sixth century.[18] For Africa, though he is more hopeful about the recovery of the distant past, Joseph Miller has agreed that there is a major break in the character of the evidence near the beginning of the second lifetime back.[19]

More than half of Apolo Kaggwa's *The Kings of Buganda* is oral history, much of it indeed the history of his own times, describing events in which he had been a prominent actor. He himself was still fairly young, but his informants included an aunt of King Muteesa, a lady whose memories would go back probably to the 1820s.[20] She in turn would have been able to draw on the reminiscences of people who were adolescent in the third quarter of the eighteenth century. It is significant that for her great-grandfather King Kyabaggu and his elder brother Namugala, but for no previous rulers, we have personal descriptions, clearly derived at no more than second hand from people who had actually known them. Namugala had a humped back and was a drunkard but (by the standards of the time) a man of mild disposition. His brother, who ousted him from the kingship, was a much fiercer character, and he was short, thickset and bald. Beyond Namugala we find ourselves in the domain of tradition, which corresponds to the history that we learn at school. That is to say, we are dealing with a past that is not remembered but taught, with what society has decided to believe about the way it came to be. And the question is then how far society, when unconstrained by documentary records, can be trusted to tell the truth – or indeed whether it has any means of knowing what the truth is.

The short answer is that it can't and it hasn't, and that, insofar as it appears to relate to periods before the middle of the eighteenth century, the Ganda tradition is not history. Since I am writing a book about it, I obviously do not believe that it is valueless, nor that understanding of the past cannot be extracted from it. But I am sure that its earlier 'chapters' cannot be taken at anything like face value as a record of historical events.

In these matters, as in most others, there are intellectual fashions, and it is important that in the 1950s and 1960s, when African history was becoming an academic sub-discipline, there was a very general disposition to believe in the truth of traditional narratives. The Iliad, written in the eighth century BC, was accepted as containing genuine memories of a war supposedly fought some four hundred years earlier, though the interval

had been almost entirely non-literate. Academics as well as the general public were convinced that 'Arthur' was the name of a man who fought and governed in early sixth-century Britain, although, apart from one ambiguous reference, there is no written evidence of his existence until the eighth century, and very little even then. And biblical scholars, who agreed that there was no historical writing in Israel before the tenth century BC, were nevertheless confident that the Patriarchs were real people who had lived seven or eight hundred years before David and Solomon. In all these domains a more sceptical attitude is now evident. For Dark Age Britain, it is sufficient to contrast Leslie Alcock, *Arthur's Britain* (Harmondsworth, 1971) and John Morris, *The Age of Arthur* (Chichester, 1973) with Nicholas Higham, *Rome, Britain and the Anglo-Saxons* (London, 1992), in which Arthur is barely mentioned at all. In Old Testament history the deconstruction was accomplished by T. L. Thompson and J. van Seters in the mid-1970s.[21] On Troy, Moses Finley was always a sceptic, but by 1979 he could be confident of scholarly acceptance when he wrote that 'Homer's Trojan War . . . must be evicted from the history of the Greek Bronze Age'.[22]

Although Africanists sometimes proceeded as though no one had ever studied proto-literate history before, they can hardly have been uninfluenced by the prevailing climate of scholarly opinion. For them, however, there were special reasons for suspending disbelief. The rise of African history coincided with the transition from colonial rule to independence, and was very much a part of it. The new nations were perceived to need a past in order that they might have a future, and in areas such as Uganda only tradition could give that past any real depth of time. It is true that there were dangers in its study and promotion, in that it was the property of 'tribes', whose pride and self-awareness could pose a threat to the newly created 'nation-states', almost all of which were multi-tribal. However, it was hoped that by setting out the traditions of the separate tribes and showing their interrelationships scholars would be able to bring a national history to birth. The need was not just ideological but also immediately practical. It was clearly wrong that African schoolchildren should go on being fed the Tudors and Stuarts; they should be learning the history of their own people instead, or as well. But their teachers, African as well as expatriate, had grown up with the Tudors and Stuarts; and it was thus necessary that the new African history should as far as possible be of a familiar kind, a reasonably confident tale of political successions in an agreed chronological frame. Lists of the *kabakas* of Buganda, the *bakama* or Bunyoro and the *rwots* of the Payera Acholi were soon in print, complete with dates and ready to be learnt by rote. The dates, it is true, were only given as approximate, but Standard VII would obviously take little notice of plus-or-minus signs.

There was in fact a powerful incentive to blur the obvious and crucial distinction between history in literate and in non-literate societies, between textbook and tradition. It was often argued that the way in which history is taught to the young is always influenced by the prejudice and self-interest of the teachers and of those who direct them, with the implication that accounts of the past based on oral tradition are no more unreliable than any other. But that was to miss a vital point, which is that where there are written records invention and misrepresentation are subject to constraint. Students can in principle go behind teacher and textbook to look at the chronicles and other surviving materials for themselves. Of course chronicles are selective, usually biased, sometimes actually mendacious; but they tell us what their authors believed, or wished others to believe, soon after the events that they report. Traditions, on the other hand, are documents of the time at which they are reduced to writing, and there is no way that they can be verified. An exception must be made for societies in which they are preserved in verse or other patterned form and memorised verbatim, often with severe penalties for error, by hereditary professionals. There is, however, no reason to think that anything like that took place in Buganda, where there was no special guild of remembrancers. There were, it is true, shrines that were said to contain the remains of former kings, and at each shrine there was a woman who claimed to be the successor of the king's queen-sister and who could rehearse, with more or less picturesque detail, the deeds of his reign. How much credence should be given to this institution is a question that will need close scrutiny, but suffice it to say here that shrines are by no means always authentic. And without such special protection the chain of testimonies, of which oral tradition is composed, is vulnerable at every link; it may have been – probably was – tampered with to suit the interests of each succeeding generation. More than that, at the end of the chain there may be, not an original event, but an original fiction.

Tradition is not really a single category but a variable mixture of at least three different things: genealogy, saga and myth. Knowledge of genealogy is obviously vital in societies that, like most African ones, are structured by lineage, so that status, land rights and marriage possibilities depend on ancestry. By the same token, royal and chiefly pedigrees are the indispensable charters of authority and power. However, it has long been recognised that for that very reason they are commonly adjusted, if not fabricated outright, and not only in Africa. David Henige has used material from all over the world to show that royal descent lines of any length are more than likely to be false.[23] As a matter of fact I was made aware of this at an early age. My step-grandmother (and this will be the last family anecdote) was a keen adherent of the British–Israelite movement, and she possessed a chart

showing that King George V was descended, by way of Kenneth McAlpin, founder of the kingdom of Scotland, from one of the last kings of Judah, who died in exile in Egypt. It followed that the British Empire was heir to the promise of world dominion that had been given to the seed of Abraham. Even at the age of twelve I could not but notice that the links between Egypt in the sixth century before Christ and Argyll in the ninth century after him were somewhat lacking in credibility. I did not then know that they had been forged by medieval Scottish propagandists before being re-used by twentieth-century eccentrics.

Comparative studies suggest a more basic objection: the names at or near the beginning of a traditional genealogy are usually – one may probably say always – those of gods, archetypal heroes and other imaginary characters, who give dignity to the lineage by tracing it to the beginning of the world. For British genealogists, kings of Judah were only links in the chain that took the ancestry of their royal patrons back to Genesis. So attempts to establish a chronology for the origins of a kingdom by counting the royal generations back to the alleged founders are almost certainly misconceived. We do not nowadays put a date to Adam or Noah, and not all scholars would try to put one to Abraham or Jacob; and the cut-off point between theology and political history is by no means easy to detect. This is not to say that all genealogical material is concocted or unreal, but none of it can be given automatic credence.

Another kind of traditional matter that may convey historical information is that which has to be called, for want of a better term, 'saga'. This word originally meant no more than 'saying', and the Norse stories so labelled include some that I would classify as myths. As the term is used here, however, sagas are long-repeated oral tales of violence and valour, rooted in real events though usually embellished and glamourised. They are told partly for their own sake, as entertainment and inspiration, partly to gratify the descendants of outstanding warriors and honour the polity they fought for. They may well outlive the five generations of primary and secondary reminiscence, and they are history of a kind. Indeed it may be said that the warrior is the beginning of history, for he is the first kind of person who has deeds to be remembered, as distinct from ritual acts to be rehearsed. The oldest passage in the Bible is probably the Song of Deborah, celebrating the victory of Barak (and Yahweh) over Sisera; and the text itself (Judges 5:11) tells us that, before it was put into writing, the battle was commemorated by 'the players striking up in the places where the women draw water'.

Now saga in this sense is not a common African literary form. In West Africa, it is true, there is the famous tale of Sundiata, the heroic thirteenth-century founder of the kingdom of Mali; but that comes from an